

Forward Plan reference number: FP/272/01/22

Report title: Adoption of the Corporate Parenting Strategy for Essex (2022 – 2027)	
Report to: Cabinet	
Report author: Councillor Beverley Egan, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Early Years	
Date: 24 May 2022	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone’s Essex

- 1.1 Our vision for children and families is to help achieve the best outcomes for all families, children and young people by building resilience, raising aspirations and protecting the most vulnerable.
- 1.2 ‘A Good Place for Children and Families to Grow’ is one of the four strategic aims for Essex County Council, as set out in Everyone’s Essex. Under this aim, there is a commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, including children in care and care leavers. We want to ensure that no one is left behind.
- 1.3 Our new Corporate Parenting Strategy sets out how we will meet our legal duty to children in care and care leavers. It responds to what children, young people, carers and families have told us. It sets new outcomes designed to improve the lives and life chances of the children and young people in our care and care leavers.
- 1.4 We have rebranded our strategy “Our Co-Parenting Strategy”. This name was suggested to us by care leavers. They advised that the word “corporate” does not appeal to children and young people and suggested replacing it with “Co-Parenting”, also recognising that many people work together to care for them.
- 1.5 Everyone’s Essex also offers many opportunities to indirectly improve the lives of children in care and care leavers, with action outside of social care and children and families’ services. Evidence shows that there is a strong link between poverty and abuse and neglect. Our Levelling Up agenda aims to tackle the cause of inequality and poverty to create a fairer society for everyone.
- 1.6 Central to our Levelling Up agenda is the belief that a person’s potential should not be defined at birth, by who their parents are or where they live. The council and our partners should play a role in helping people define their own destiny. As good corporate parents, we should put children in care and care leavers at the heart of this agenda.

- 1.7 Vulnerable families and care leavers are also affected by the shortage of suitable, affordable social housing in Essex, so should be part of strategic discussions on Housing.
- 1.8 By supporting our most vulnerable children to have good mental and physical health, get the most from their education and grow into independent adults with high aspirations for the future, we will also help meet the strategic aims of:
 - Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
 - Strong, inclusive, sustainable growth
- 1.9 Our Co-Parenting Strategy is our statement of intent. Following its publication, we work with partners to develop Delivery Plans to achieve our stated outcomes, consulting children, young people, carers and families as appropriate.
- 1.10 As a result of our strategy, we want officers, Elected Members and our partners to ask themselves: “What can I do in my role to help children and young people in and leaving care?”

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To adopt the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-27 “Our Co-Parenting Strategy” as set out at Appendix 1.

3 Background

- 3.1 It is Essex County Council’s legal duty to act as corporate parents and care for children and young people where a care order is made. Established in The Children’s Act 1989, this duty is not just with social workers and professionals who work directly with children and young people, but with all county council staff and elected Members.
- 3.2 The Act also places a duty on our partners - including Health, Education and Housing services - to support Children’s Services departments to meet Corporate Parenting responsibilities. We need help from our partners across the Essex system to give our children and young people stability, community and the best start in life.
- 3.3 Our purpose is to provide early help to children and their families, to prevent them from becoming children in need and to protect children and young people from neglect and abuse. We work on bringing the right children into care for the right amount of time. When children are in our care, we support them to maintain relationships with their families and friends and reunite them with their families as safely and as soon as possible.
- 3.4 As a result of our approach, we have one of the lowest rates of children in care in the country: 34/10,000 compared to 67/10,000 nationally and 56/10,000 for statistically-comparable local authorities. We are proud of our achievements and

our Ofsted Outstanding rating in this area, but we always want to build on this success, learn from children and peers and continue to be better.

4 Development of the Strategy

4.1 The previous Corporate Parenting Strategy ran from 2017-20, with an update in 2021 in response to the Covid19 Pandemic.

4.2 In 2021, we achieved a positive Ofsted Focussed Inspection on Care Leavers. During the inspection, it was recommended that our next strategy:

- Reflected the achievements and innovations since the last strategy
- Amplified children and young people's voices
- Included measurable outcomes

4.3 We have taken these recommendations forward in the development of our new strategy, which is attached at Appendix 1.

4.4 When we spoke to care leavers about the strategy, they told us that the formal term "Corporate Parenting" does not appeal to children and young people. They wanted to use "Co-Parenting" instead, as it covers the various people who work together to care for them. We have adopted this as our brand for the strategy and will use this when we talk to children and young people about corporate parenting.

4.5 We have drafted the new strategy based on evidence and insight collected from children, young people, carers, families and professionals through the Involvement Service, Independent Review and Audit Services and many other professionals who work with children and young people in and leaving care.

4.6 Our Priorities are designed to be meaningful to children and young people in and leaving care and reflect their experiences. We have run key parts of the strategy past a group of care leavers who have helped bring the strategy to life with their suggestions, including making sure we use tone and language that speaks to children and young people.

1. **Self:** Celebrating individuality, championing diversity and inclusion and helping children and young people understand where they come from.
2. **Health:** Supporting emotional wellbeing, championing healthy lifestyles and keeping children and young people safe.
3. **Home:** Providing good, stable homes and ensuring children and young people feel cared for.
4. **Learning:** Helping children and young people learn, have high aspirations, grow as people and enjoy school, college, university and training.

5. **Independence:** Helping care leavers achieve independence as successful, happy adults who can feel confident in work and if they become parents themselves.

- 4.7 Related to these Priorities, our overall approach of ‘the right children in care for the right amount of time’ and our commitment to listening to children, young people, carers and families, we have seven Outcomes:

	Our Outcomes
1	The right children are in care, the length of time in care is safely reduced, and families feel involved and supported
2	Children and young people in care, care leavers and families feel listened to, involved and understand what is happening to them
3	Children and young people in care and leaving care are proud to be who they are and feel a sense of belonging
4	Children and young people in care and leaving care are happy, healthy and safe
5	Children and young people in care and leaving care are settled and secure in their homes and feel part of a family
6	Children and young people in care and leaving care feel happy, confident and secure in school, college, university or training, have improved educational outcomes and high aspirations for the future
7	Care leavers feel cared for, settled, connected to others and supported to find jobs and start adult life

- 4.8 Our Outcomes also correspond to the Essex Pledge promises. The Pledge sets out our commitments as corporate parents. It was written by children in care and care leavers and is updated each year (see chapter 7 in Appendix 1).

5 Working in partnership

- 5.1 To improve Outcomes for children in care and care leavers, we need to work together across the Essex system to help tackle the challenges that Essex County Council cannot tackle alone, such as housing and employment for care leavers.
- 5.2 In preparing the strategy, we discussed our emerging Priorities at the Children’s Partnership Board, the Children in Care and Leaving Care Partnership Board. The Chair of Corporate Parenting Panel, Cllr Beverley Egan, has written to our District, Borough and City Councils Leaders and Chief Execs to raise awareness of our emerging strategy and invite ideas for working together on delivering it.
- 5.3 We have engaged with Members and key partners through the Corporate Parenting Panel and the People and Families Scrutiny Committee. We have received endorsement of the strategy, helpful feedback and ideas for future

communication to help raise awareness and galvanise action across the Essex system post-publication.

- 5.4 This is a first step to gaining partners' commitment to helping children in care and care leavers. At the time of writing, we have received letters of support from the Leader of Basildon Borough Council and Chief Executive of Tendring District Council, including examples of best practice in their councils which can be shared with others.
- 5.5 The feedback we have received has been incorporated into the final Priorities, Outcomes and Suggested Actions to be taken forward in our Delivery Plans.
- 5.6 Following publication of the strategy, we will carry out comprehensive engagement to promote and embed the Co-Parenting Strategy across the council and beyond. This will include consultation and collaboration with partners to develop Delivery Plans for action across the county council and with partners from across the Essex system.

6 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

- 6.1 This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision
 - Provide an equal foundation for every child
 - Share prosperity with everyone
- 6.2 Approving the recommendations in this report will support the Council's ambition to be net carbon neutral by 2030 by supporting children in care to gain a good education, high aspirations and have the opportunity to be part of our future green economy.
- 6.3 This report is directly related to our strategic priority for Children and Families in 'Everyone's Essex':
 - A good place for children and families to grow
- 6.4 By caring for our most vulnerable children and supporting them to live healthy lives, achieve their aspiration and become independent adults, it also supports:
 - Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
 - Strong, inclusive sustainable economy

7 Options

- 7.1 There are two options, either adopt the strategy in its current form or do not adopt.
- 7.2 We recommend Option 1 – Adopt. Our new strategy reflects the thoughts and feelings of children, young people, their carers, families and professionals. It is

written with language that is accessible to children and young people to which it relates and addresses the issues they most care about. Care leavers have been involved in developing its key aspects, including the new brand and the Priorities.

- 7.3 Professionals from across Children and Families services and our partners have contributed to the strategy. It has been reviewed by Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel and PAF Scrutiny Committee.
- 7.4 Adopting the strategy will give us a platform to raise awareness of the needs of children in care and care leavers and support renewed partnership work to improve outcomes for them.
- 7.5 Option 2 (do not adopt) would leave us without a corporate parenting strategy. This would also risk our relationship with the young people who have been involved in its development. It would also increase the probability of us not meeting the statutory corporate parenting principles.

8 Issues for consideration

8.1 Financial implications

- 8.1.1 Adopting the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-27 “Our Co-Parenting Strategy” will help support the effective future management of the revenue and capital spend of the Children and Families portfolio.
- 8.1.2 In particular by having the outcome of ‘the right children in care for the right amount of time’ will support the forecasting of children in care numbers through the Medium Term Resource Strategy.
- 8.1.4 This will mean that forecasts and ultimately the expenditure incurred by the Children and Families portfolio will be prioritised to those children who should be in care and are in the right placement type. Given that there are significant price variances between placing a child in a residential setting compared to an Essex Foster Carer, the strategy will be key in ensuring future costs are kept under control.

8.2 Legal implications

- 8.2.1 The Corporate Parenting Strategy helps to ensure that the Council complies with its statutory duties under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and associated guidance
- 8.2.2 The Children and Social Work Act 2017 includes corporate parenting principles, which comprise of seven needs that local authorities in England must have regard to whenever they exercise a function in relation to looked-after children or care leavers. These are the need:
 - (a) to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;

- (b) to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
- (c) to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;
- (d) to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
- (e) to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
- (f) for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work;
- (g) to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living

9 Equality and Diversity Considerations

9.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful.
- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

9.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

9.3 The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

10 List of Appendices

- 1) Our Co-Parenting Strategy 2022-27
- 2) Draft Executive Summary
- 3) Equality impact assessment

11 List of Background papers

- Ofsted Focused visit to Essex County Council children's services – Letter dated 22 November 2021
- It's My Life Festival Reports 2019, 2020, 2021
- Shared views (Involvement Service feedback summary)
- Care leavers' experiences of support during the Covid-19 pandemic (ARU report)
- Corporate Parenting Strategy 2017 – Update 2021
- Letters of support from Tendring District and Basildon Borough Councils